



Sean Brennan, local businessman and believer in Germantown's history, stands outside of his office on Germantown Ave. (Jenny Swigoda/for NewsWorks)

One glance at the Business section of any daily newspaper shows unemployment isn't the only casualty in the economic downturn. Existing businesses, big and small, are suffering too; shuttering their windows or merging to stay alive, while new businesses struggle to find capital to get off the ground. Nowhere is this trend more worrisome than in small "downtown" economies.

Communities such as Germantown, Chestnut Hill and Manayunk have encountered this problem like most other small towns, and each has devised ways to tackle it head-on.

Thinking green

Germantown is attempting to revitalize its historic business district, which has been struggling for much longer than the recent recession.

John Churchville, president of the Greater Germantown Business Association (GGBA), sees "green" when he thinks about the future of business in Germantown.

“We encourage the businesses to think ‘futuristically’,” said Churchville.

At a time when businesses are being hit by the one-two punch of decreased sales and rising rates from PGW and PECO, no money-saving measure is too small.

Churchville and other members of the GGBA have been looking into ways to make Germantown more environmentally advanced. At the group’s monthly meetings, Churchville tells members to think about painting their roofs white and to place potted plants outside their businesses. Churchville asserts that this would not only attract more customers, but it would also keep merchants’ energy costs down.

Service pays

Despite the economic climate, some businesses are getting it right. LeRoi Simmons has maintained LeRoi and Cinzia Simmons Beauty Salon, which he has run with his wife, Cinzia, for the last 31 years. Simmons says that the salon has seen a slight drop in profit during the last year, but that customers remain loyal through these tough times.

“Folks haven’t cut the services,” Simmons said. “Hair is not viewed as a luxury.”

In the salon on a breezy Saturday afternoon, Zimbeana Powell and Yvonne Baines, two longtime clients, chat while stylist Rhonda Mitchell maintains Powell’s dreadlocks. Meanwhile, Cinzia Simmons walks across the room with a mug of tea. It is for another client reclining under a blow dryer. It’s this type of service, providing a warmth and personal touch that has made the salon successful.

“We reinvest into the business, we are nice to customers,” asserted Simmons, noting that, after all “some have been coming for 30 years.”

Not one for idleness, Simmons is also the volunteer executive director of the Central Germantown Council. This conduit for project development aid in the region has been struggling, with recent budget cuts at 70%. Simmons is frustrated.

“Everyone is on their own now,” he said. “The cost of doing business, we’re in a broke city, in a broke state, in a broke country,” Simmons continued, in reference to the tax hikes and the rising costs of energy, water, and insurance.

Sean Brennan, a CPA located in Germantown, feels that same frustration. He says that while Mayor Michael Nutter may be declaring that business in Philadelphia is improving, Germantown has yet to feel the benefits. Flash mobs, crime, and nuisance businesses plague the business district, making it difficult for merchants to stay afloat.

Building on the bedrock: History...

While many merchants are growing weary of the ebb and flow of a depressed and uncertain economy, **Brennan** and others remain optimistic.

“There’s a bedrock here that they can build on,” **Brennan** said, referring to Germantown’s unique historic district.

David Young, executive director of the national historic site Cliveden, has called Germantown “the most historical neighborhood in the country.” In addition to its 15 recognized historic sites, Germantown is filled with old homes just waiting to be added to the National Historic Register by loving homeowners.

Recently, efforts by some of these historic sites, the city planning department and the two year old non-profit Germantown Community Connection have started to weave some of Germantown’s long known strengths into the beginnings of a cohesive business strategy meant to guide the community over the next few decades.

A planning grant from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission has created the resident run Germantown Classic Town committee of GCC, which is tasked with marketing the community to new residents from across the region, who might be looking for a vibrant urban center with history, character and room to grow.

And art

In addition, Classic Towns has been tapping another old strength of the neighborhood for marketing ideas - its tradition in the arts.

The proposed Germantown art district would run between Wayne and Germantown avenues from Wayne Junction to Johnson Street and it would be all about creating a cohesive center for the craftspeople and artists that make Germantown their working home. David Hamme, who chairs the Classic Town committee, thinks the effort could eventually transform Germantown into a regional center for the arts.

To get the ball rolling, GCC and the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown are hosting an “arts community roundtable” Feb. 24 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. It’s an open invitation to artists and creative types for their input on how to build the arts scene in the neighborhood so that it promotes not just arts, but economic stability as well.

For more information on the arts roundtable contact Reverend Kevin Porter 215-518-1675 or email: KvPrt@aol.com. Or contact Dr. Vivian Nix-Early 215-842-0248 or email: vnixearl@gmail.com.